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SUBJECT: HONG KONG CARDINAL VISITS HCMC

¶1. (SBU) On December 13, PolOff met with the Vicar General of the HCMC Archdiocese to discuss the December 3 visit of the Bishop of Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze Kiun, to Ho Chi Minh City. This was the first visit of Cardinal Zen to Vietnam since his investiture in February 2006 and only his second post-1975. (According to the Vicar General, the Cardinal had visited northern Vietnam in 2002 to attend the ordination of a colleague.) Cardinal Zen was a member of a delegation that included Cardinal Telesphore Placidus Toppo, Chairman of the Indian Bishops' Council, and Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales, Archbishop of Manila. The cardinals were invited by HCMC Cardinal Pham Minh Man to celebrate the 500th birthday of Saint Francisco Xavier, one of the founders of the Jesuit order and perhaps the first Catholic missionary in East Asia.

¶2. (SBU) According to the Vicar General, the cardinals' visit was a long-standing objective of HCMC Cardinal Man, who wished to improve ties and coordination among the Church's Asian dioceses. Earlier efforts to organize such a visit were rebuffed by the Communist Party, the Vicar General said. However, earlier this year the HCMC's Cardinal Man raised the idea again with officials from the Central Committee for Religious Affairs, who sanctioned the initiative. Former HCMC Party Chief Nguyen Minh Triet also blessed the proposal shortly before he assumed Vietnam's Presidency.

¶3. (SBU) HCMC Party Secretary and Politburo member Le Thanh Hai officially received the visiting Cardinals at HCMC Party headquarters on December 3. According to the Vicar General, Cardinal Zen described for Secretary Hai the difficulties the Catholic Church faces in China and expressed his hope that the Chinese would adopt the Vietnamese model of Church-State cooperation. Hai did not respond directly, but visibly broadened his smile when Cardinal Zen said that religious freedom conditions are better in Vietnam than China. Secretary Hai praised the role of the Catholic Church in working with the government to combat HIV/AIDS in HCMC. The meeting was covered by all major HCMC newspapers.

Improving Vatican-GVN relations

¶4. (SBU) The Vicar General said that, concurrent with the visit of the three Asian cardinals, a high-level Catholic Church delegation from France was touring Vietnam. These visits are part of the process of normalization of ties between the Vatican and the GVN, he said. The Vatican is ready to fully normalize ties now, he said, but is waiting

for the GVN to make the next official move.

15. (SBU) Although the GVN still insists that it approve the selection of bishops and other key personnel, in reality, that process has become more streamlined and more cooperative. In the past, the GVN required that the Vatican submit a list of three alternatives for any one position to be filled; the GVN would then select among the three. Moreover, the selection process could drag on interminably. More recently, however, the Vatican has been able to submit only one name. The ongoing process to find a replacement for the recently-deceased Bishop of the northern Bac Ninh diocese is a case in point, the Vicar General said. In September, Bishop Joseph Nguyen Quang Tuyen died while undergoing cancer treatment in Portland, Oregon. The Vatican has been able to work quickly and effectively through the Vietnamese Ambassador to Italy to identify a replacement. Additionally, the Catholic Church now finds it easier to send seminarians overseas to study, including to the United States. It is distinctly possible that in the near future one of the next Vietnamese bishops will be U.S.-trained, an unimaginable outcome only a few years ago.

16. (SBU) Comment: Secretary Hai is a careful and effective politician. Religion is a "sensitive" issue, as is the topic of relations with China. He and the Party would have deliberated on whether and how to receive the outspoken Cardinal Zen. Therefore, it is not a surprise that the HCMC Archdiocese would view the cardinals' official welcome at Party headquarters as a positive signal about the prospects for full normalization of relations between the GVN and the Vatican. End Comment.

WINNICK